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Leaders discuss keeping commerce moving on low Mississippi River

ST. LOUIS – Leaders from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Coast Guard, and American Waterways Operators discussed their expectations and challenges to navigation during a joint news conference today in St. Louis on the Mississippi River as it reaches record lows.

Maj. Gen. John W. Peabody, commander, Mississippi Valley Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers talked about the measures taken by the Corps of Engineers throughout the Mississippi River Valley including ongoing dredging operations on the river, and plans to address rock formations that threaten navigation near Thebes, Illinois.

Peabody cited preparations for the drought that date back to the last record-setting drought in 1988-89, including the construction of river training structures that have drastically reduced the need for dredging. The investment in constructing rock dikes, weirs and other structures allowed for a better channel now than in previous droughts.

“The situation we face today would be worse, more acute earlier, had it not been for that investment,” he said.

Peabody also cited efforts from upstream to help keep the river navigable. The Corps’ St. Paul District is releasing stored water to help mitigate for low levels on the Middle Mississippi, with a slight rise expected in the St. Louis area mid-December. Peabody authorized Mississippi River reservoirs to store extra water for long-term drought management, but lack of rain has hampered that effort at most Corps lakes.

“This is not something we can solve in a few days, a few weeks, or even a few months if we have a persistent drought situation. We have to plan for the long term,” Peabody said. “We’re going to have to husband our resources for when the situation gets truly dire. In my personal estimate, we’re not there yet.”

Rear Adm. Roy A. Nash, commander, Eighth District, U.S. Coast Guard, highlighted the critical coordination that happens between the Coast Guard, the Corps and industry, especially during difficult times on the river.

“We have worked together throughout high water last year, through low water this year, and will continue to work together,” Nash said.

Daily conference calls and regional coordination between industry, the Corps and the Coast Guard are ongoing as conditions change on the dynamic Mississippi River.

“This is a vital thoroughfare linking producers and commodities from the heartland to markets around the world,” Nash said. “We recognize the incredible importance of our collective work in keeping commerce flowing on the rivers and protecting our nation’s economic prosperity.”

Representing the industries that depend on river commerce were Craig Philip, Chief Executive Officer of Ingram Barge Company in Nashville, and George Foster, President, JB Marine Service, Inc., from St. Louis. Both men highlighted the acute impacts of potential river closures on their industries as well as the nation.

“The cooperative tenor with the industry and government partners has been a testament to intrinsic importance of this system to the nation,” Philip said. “A cessation of navigation would have a ripple effect of economic loss that would be felt most heavily in the Midwest, but would endanger our national prosperity as well.”

The St. Louis District Corps of Engineers is working on a contract to remove the rock pinnacles near Thebes in February. The Corps has also created electronic navigation charts overlays of this area at various river stages for mariners.

Video of the news conference is available on the St. Louis District Corps of Engineers YouTube channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/teamsaintlouis>.